

Gretsch Nighthawk II Plus



by Bob Saydlowski, Jr.

As the drum badges state, Gretsch has been making drums since 1883. Nearly 100 years later, they're still going strong—naturally, with some changes.

Gretsch started it all in Brooklyn, later moved to Cincinnati, and have recently been bought by Kustom Music in Kansas. Gretsch was once (and probably still is) considered *The* jazz drum kit. Nevertheless, the company has had to change some to accommodate modern playing.

The *Nighthawk II Plus* kit consists of a 14 x 22 bass drum, 8 x 12, 9 x 13, 10 x 14, 12 x 15 tom-toms, 16 x 16 floor tom, and 5 x 14 brass shell snare drum. All the drums (except the snare) are 6-ply wood with no reinforcing rings. They are joint-butt and have staggered laminations. Synthetic glue is used in the lamination process. The interiors are coated with a grey aluminum-base shell sealant which helps to contain the sound.

The bass drum has 20 separate lugs with T-style tuners and fat, cast claws. The hoops are also 6-ply wood, finished to match the rest of the kit. Beneath the batter head, Gretsch has installed its famed adjustable felt-strip damper, activated by a large round knob which stretches or loosens the felt strip at the playing head, allowing for variable degrees of muffle. It's a good idea, and I'm surprised more companies haven't followed up on this innovation.

Gretsch has developed new spurs for their bass drums for extra shell support. The hollow steel tubes extend from the inside spur block position, up to the top of the shell where they join with the mounting screws of the tom-tom holder base plate. The cast blocks accept half-inch "disappearing-type" spur legs, angled a bit forward. The legs have large rubber tips that may be removed to expose fat spikes. They are locked in position with a T-handle bolt. Besides allowing more support to the shell, the new spurs also provide a good place to stuff some padding behind if needed. The idea

is sensible, as many drummers are removing front heads, and these internal support spurs help to prevent ovaling of the shell. Gretsch also makes counter-hoop clips to hold on the front hoop with all hardware. To further arrest forward creep of the drum, Gretsch also fits their *Cyclops* anchor to the front hoop. The anchor is a long, thin pointed T-screw that locks at the base with a wing nut. When screwed down, the sharp point digs into the floor and keeps the drum in a steadied playing position.

The bass drum comes fitted with a Gretsch *Permatone* coated head on the playing side, and a *Permatone* transparent on the audience side. The drum was very resonant, but with a bit of an "edge" to it. Somehow, it was not quite as loud as the other drums in the kit. For modern playing, padding would be helpful. A thicker batter head could also aid in decreasing some of the overtones. Single-headed, it produced a good solid attack, and I imagine it would be great for recording.

The 8 x 12 tom-tom has 10 lugs, the 9 x 13 has 12. The 10 x 14, 12 x 15 and 16 x 16 floor tom each have 16 lugs. All the drums come with die-cast hoops and an internal twin-head muffler is installed on top and bottom heads. Each muffler is operated by a large chromed knob, and covers a wide area of the head when adjusted "on."

Gretsch's *Creative Research Series* hardware is reflected in their new 9002 double tom-tom holder. The holder has a single half-inch tube protruding through the shell, locked for height via a T-screw at the base plate which presses an inner piece of spring metal set inside the casting. This down post also has a drumkey-operated memory ring with a tongue that connects into a notch in the base casting to insure accurate height set-up. A piece of felt is placed underneath the base casting so the metal does not make direct contact with the resonating wood shell.

The drums are held by L-arms which fit into large molded castings on the down tube. These castings are movable throughout the length of the post in any direction, and are tightened on either side by drumkey-operated screws, forming a clamp (much like Pearl's method of indirect clamping). The castings are modular, formed to fit somewhat like two jigsaw puzzle pieces. Adding another casting gives you a triple tom holder; take one away, and you have a single. The L-arms are knurled and are held by large eye bolts. Angle is adjusted via a ratchet, set loose by a T-screw. Gretsch has gone so far as to fit memory rings on the arms for distance and drum height. These rings have tongues to correspond with notches in the post castings, and on the drum brackets. However, the knurling on the L-arms makes the memory rings quite hard to adjust, as well as sometimes making it difficult to adjust the arm's angle. The tom-tom brackets resemble Ludwig's old brackets with internal eye bolts. The Gretsch brackets, however, are tightened with a T-screw, cushioned with felt, backed with metal plates, and emblazoned with the Gretsch logo. Personally, I never did like the eye bolt tom-tom mounting, though this holder seems to do its job well, with a minimum of twisting and turning once the memory rings are locked in. And there is enough height to satisfy most all drummers.

In this set-up, the 12" and 13" toms mount on the bass drum, while the 14" and 15" drums are on a *Creative Research* floor stand, whose top tube is the 9002 holder down tube with castings. The tube fits into a double-strut tripod base with rubber wedge feet, and a nylon insert at its tier. It's modelled after the new *Giant* stands. There is also a memory ring on the tube, minus one tongue, since there is no place on the tierjoint for a tongue to locate.

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Product Close-Up *continued from page 90*

The 16" floor tom has three legs. The brackets are cushioned with felt. The legs are hollow, flanged outwards only once, and have rubber tips.

All the toms are fitted with Gretsch *Permatone* coated heads, top and bottom. The rack toms have a solid, punchy sound, thanks to the die-cast hoops. They were all very resonant with the coated heads. Even when changed to Evans *Hydraulics*, a definite pitch still came through. The floor tom had surprising depth. It could be tuned down quite low, and still maintain great power. Removal of the bottom heads gave more of a "rock" sound, but with the same tonal clarity.

The snare drum included with the *Nighthawk II Plus* is the 4/65; one of 15 different models. It has a chromed-brass shell with ten double-ended lugs, die-cast hoops, no reinforcing bead, and a center-throw strainer. A 5 1/2" wood-shell snare is optional. The 20-strand snares are tensioned at the butt end via a knurled-edge knob atop the butt casing. Plastic strips pass through small snare gates in the hoop, connecting with the throw-off and butt ends. The throw-off side works very smoothly. I had heard that on some Gretsch snares, the strainer had a tendency to throw itself off during loud playing. This problem seems to have been solved, thankfully. This drum also has the twin-head, knob-operated internal muffler, and has Gretsch's patented snap-in key holder. A hole is cut in the drum, the drum key is inserted, and it stays there until you need it. The key holder also allows for double venting of the drum when the key is removed.

Fitted with a coated *Permatone* batter, the drum was crisp and well-defined. Response was even throughout the playing surface. The die-cast hoops allowed for a solid rim shot without sounding too boxy. The 4165 snare drum is one of the heaviest of its size!

Gretsch has renovated their hardware line with the *Giant* stands. The new series comes from Japan, and are similar to the Tama *Titan* line.

Two cymbal stands are included with the kit, one straight and one boom. Both have double-braced, wide-stance tripod legs with fat rubber wedge tips and huge height setting castings with nylon inserts. The 4850 cymbal stand has two height-adjustable tiers and can extend to a maximum of 62". The 4852 boom stand has one height-adjustable tier and a 33"-long boom arm. The arm has a threaded weight on the end, and the same ratchet tilter as the 4850. These cymbal stands are both very stable. The straight stand folds to 29", while the boom stand compacts to 37" (which may not be enough to fit in some trap cases).

The 4988 snare stand also has double-braced tripod legs, and a nylon insert at its height joint. It has the typical basket design using a capstan nut on a threaded shaft to close in on the drum. Angle is adjusted by a ratchet tilter which is very smooth, and again, the stand is strong and stable.

The 4849 hi-hat has double-strut legs and an externally-adjusted compression spring. The footboard is hinged heel with a movable toe stop. It mates with the pulley via a leather strap wrapped around a rivet rod. The base of the stand has two holes into which thin rods from the bottom of the pedal's heel plate connect. There is also a knob-operated spur at the base. The height tube has a memory clamp and a plastic cup at its top with a till screw. I must admit that this hi-hat stand had one of the worst actions I've ever felt, probably due to a binding-up in the pull shaft. Adjusting the spring really made no difference. Perhaps Gretsch should revert back to their old model hi-hat. It worked a lot better.

Last, but not least, we have the *Giant* bass drum pedal, practically an exact replica of the now-outdated Pearl 810. It has a hinged-heel footboard with an adjustable toe stop and a synthetic linkage strap. Tension is achieved by an expansion spring stretched upward above the right side of the pedal. The footboard angle is adjustable, which in turn, adjusts beater travel. But the linkage strap is too short. You have to deal with a footboard angle that is much too great to get the beater a fair distance from the head. At the base of the curved frame are two sprung spurs. Pedal mounting is done by a block pressure plate, adjusted down to the hoop by a threaded knob. It is not one of the easiest methods around. An extremely hard felt beater is included. The action is good, despite the acute footboard angle. Discounting its other minor problems, the pedal is okay.

The *Nighthawk II Plus* kit reviewed was finished in Walnut veneer, which was glossed *beautifully* with no visual defects. Gretsch also has natural maple and red rosewood finishes available, and, at a slightly lower cost (\$2,403), white or black plastic covering. For years, Tony Williams has been using Gretsch kits in a Canary Yellow covering. I'm told the finish will be available to the public in the near future. There is even an option to order the kit without hardware, reducing retail by \$440.

The new Gretsch catalog lists 29 different drum kit configurations. As I said before, after almost 100 years, Gretsch is still going strong. Die-hard fans of the *Gretsch Sound* will be happy to know that the *Sound* has not changed, and that the quality craftsmanship is in keeping with the Gretsch tradition.

